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FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM Dan Rather: News and Commentary STATION WTOP Radio  
CBS Network

DATE July 15, 1985 5:40 P.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT President's Aides

DAN RATHER: Whatever any of us may think of any of his policies at any given time, Ronald Reagan strikes many, if not most, Americans as a decent-intending man who has run a good presidency. However one interprets what the doctors are saying and not saying about the President's illness, this country is pulling for its President.

President Reagan's staff has not, so far, handled its part of this situation especially well.

Some thoughts about that in a moment.

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RATHER: Journalists who cover Presidents make mistakes. That includes this journalist. You may want to conclude that it especially includes this one. And if so, I wouldn't argue.

That's the preface for commenting -- and this is commentary -- that President Reagan's staff does not seem to have done a very good job these past few days. One reason is that they've made a mistake common to too many presidential staffers in recent years, and that is believing that the American people aren't smart enough, not sophisticated enough to handle news when the news is bad, or even when the news is just not particularly good. It's the habit of staff members around a President talking down to people and taking the attitude of: "Well, we know best." It's also the habit of believing that the American people are easily manipulated by publicity puff and image-making. It isn't true. And the better staff members around any President know it. But all too often, there are others.

One very recent and telling example: Friday night and Saturday morning. Friday it was announced that the President was required to have major surgery. He would be unconscious for about three hours, with a rather extended recovery period necessary immediately after that, the recovery room period, when the President might be conscious some of the time. Then, of course, there would be a number of days, at a minimum, for recovery. Mind you, this everybody knew Friday.

Yet President Reagan's staff, led by Chief of Staff Donald Regan and Communications Director Pat Buchanan, insisted that the American people be told that Mr. Reagan would remain in charge of all decision-making. Vice President Bush, it was emphasized Friday, would not be coming off vacation in Maine, and it was emphasized there would not be any transfer of power. Press Secretary Larry Speakes was sent out to say so.

Lo and behold, Saturday morning Bush does come back to Washington. Ah, but the American people are told that he did so strictly on his own, that it was not directly related to the President's surgery.

No one believed that, and with good reason. Because it wasn't true. It was a falsehood. And a totally unnecessary one at that.

Shortly after Mr. Bush arrived back in Washington, President Reagan signed a letter officially temporarily handing presidential powers to Bush.

The White House fogging machine had been wheeled into action, trying to keep the truth from citizens.

It is hard to believe -- I, for one, do not believe it -- that this is the way President Reagan, himself, wanted things. It is even harder to believe that this country or this President were well served by those who decided to wheel the old fogging machine into service.

None of this is said in anger. All of it is said in sadness, and in a spirit of: "Hey, staff members, you can do better." And at a time when all Americans are hoping for the speedy recovery of their President.